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Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/Sub.2/1999/NGO/11
28 June 1999

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection
of Minorities
Fifty-first session
Item 8 of the provisional agenda

PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST AND THE PROTECTION OF MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by North-South XXI, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 June 1999]

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The concept of "minority"

1. The concept of "minority", like that of "indigenous people", raises a fundamental question of definition. As deemed appropriate, some movements proclaim themselves representatives of a "minority", others of "indigenous peoples", without any precise criterion being established. The issue is assuming major importance in the context of the process of globalization causing a general weakening of the State.

2. It is necessary to try and formulate a typology of minorities enabling a distinction to be drawn between:

Minorities which are merely one component of a nation divided by States alien to them (this is the case, for instance, of the Kurdish nation placed under the domination of States rejecting the existence of a Kurdish State, and also of the aboriginal or Amerindian peoples); and

Ostensible minorities which, although belonging to the same civilization and having the same centuries-old history as the majority component of a nation, exhibit special cultural, linguistic and other features which may be subject to harassment.

3. The "minority nations" in the former category are often threatened with extinction, being victims of a kind of ethnocidal exclusion or viewed as purely folkloric. The spirit of the Charter of the United Nations and various solutions adopted gives them an evident right to self-determination and full development. These peoples, by "testifying to themselves", demonstrate their right to existence and recognition. The particular components of a single civilizational unit warrant a different kind of treatment: their difficulties reflect shortcomings in democracy. Not to heed their complaints (for example, concerning the inferior status accorded to their language, religion, special cultural characteristics, etc.) is to commit a violation of civil and political rights.

4. By contrast, the widespread recognition, in the North as in the South, of a right to self-determination for any ostensible "minority" proclaiming itself as such without any precise criterion, serves to accelerate the decline of the State and the fundamental principle of sovereignty which is still applicable, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. The dissolution of many States as a result of this widespread recognition can only play into the hands of the major Powers, which themselves refuse to consider the existence of internal minorities (cf. the Corsican, Basque, Catalan, Flemish and other questions); the "Balkanization" of the non-Western world is an additional factor weakening the small- and medium-sized States and fostering their complete political "disarmament" vis-à-vis the major Powers.

5. It would be paradoxical if, in the name of the "right of minorities", the right of peoples and the equal sovereignty of States were to become obsolete.